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AUTHOR Trevett, Suzanne; McMillan, James H.
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ABSTRACT

This review of the literature on parental involvement in urban schools is organized into three sections: (1) types of parental involvement; (2) practical involvement activities found in successful urban school programs; and (3) characteristics of successful urban school parental involvement programs. The research reports and surveys reviewed clearly indicate that the majority of parents do want to be involved in their children's education, but many do not know how they can help. Most teachers also want involved parents. Several examples from the research indicate that problems in promoting parent involvement are not insurmountable. Small steps can lead to positive gains and to an acknowledgment of the ability of the public school system to provide a quality education for all children. (Contains 14 references.) (SLD)

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ENHANCING PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN URBAN SCHOOLS: TYPES OF PROGRAMS, CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL PROGRAMS, AND PROVEN STRATEGIES

METROPOLITAN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH CONSORTIUM

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METROPOLITAN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH CONSORTIUM

PO BOX 842020 • RICHMOND VA 23284-2020 • Phone: (804) 828-0478
FAX: (804) 828-0479 • E-MAIL: jmcmilla@saturn.vcu.edu

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ENHANCING PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN URBAN SCHOOLS: TYPES OF PROGRAMS, CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL PROGRAMS, AND PROVEN STRATEGIES

Prepared by:

Suzanne Trevett
Research Assistant

James H. McMillan
Professor

Virginia Commonwealth University
September 1998

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Preface

In April of 1998 the L. Douglas Wilder Symposium was held in Richmond to focus on improving Richmond City Public Schools (RPS). Participants at the symposium were asked to commit to providing some resource, information, or assistance that would help overcome barriers that prevent students from reaching their academic potential. The Director of MERC, Dr. James H. McMillan, was a participant at the symposium and agreed to use the resources of MERC to review the literature and survey best practices to provide practical suggestions for enhancing parental involvement in urban schools. Rather than doing an academically oriented review of literature, the focus was on practices that have been proven to work in the field. The primary researcher for this project, Suzanne Trevett, was directed to narrow her search of literature and practices to parental involvement strategies that have worked well in urban schools. MERC is pleased to present this report to RPS in the hope that the information will be useful.

Introduction

Numerous studies and reports document the fact that parental involvement in education is positively related to higher student achievement. A review of the literature also reveals that educators regard parental involvement in a variety of ways, ranging from the traditional concept of inviting parents to back-to-school night, to more participatory efforts such as parental membership on decision-making committees and executive councils. Studies also show that parental involvement relates to enhanced community satisfaction with education and to better physical facilities. None of these is an inconsequential or isolated factor; each impinges the other, and taken together they constitute major challenges facing urban school administrators.

This report is organized in three sections: (1) types of parental involvement; (2) practical involvement activities found in successful urban school programs; and (3) characteristics of successful urban school parental involvement programs. A list of references follows the conclusion of the third section. The references are filed in the MERC office and copies can be requested.

Types of Parental Involvement

Joyce Epstein's studies of parent-school partnerships led her to develop a typology of parental involvement. She identifies five types of involvement and notes the importance of distinguishing among the five in terms of processes, materials, and outcomes. Epstein's typology as she described it to Ron Brandt in *Educational Leadership* (1989) is summarized as follows:

> **Type 1**. *The basic obligations of parents* refers to the responsibilities of families to ensure children's health and safety; to the parenting and child-rearing skills needed to prepare children for school; to the continual need to supervise, discipline, and guide children at each age level; and to the need to build positive *home conditions* that support school learning and behavior appropriate for each grade level.
>
> **Type 2**. *The basic obligations of schools* refers to the *communications from school to home* about school programs and children's progress. Schools vary the form and frequency of communications such as memos, notices, report cards, and conferences, and greatly affect whether the information about school programs and children's progress can be understood by all parents.
>
> **Type 3**. *Parent involvement at school* refers to parent volunteers who assist teachers, administrators, and children in classrooms or in other areas of the school. It also refers to parents who come to school to support student performances, sports, or other events, or to attend workshops or other programs for their own education or training.
>
> **Type 4**. *Parent involvement in learning activities at home* refers to parent-initiated activities or child-initiated requests for help, and ideas or instruction from teachers for parents to monitor or *assist their own children* at home on learning activities that are coordinated with the children's class work.
>
> **Type 5**. *Parent involvement in governance and advocacy* refers to parents' taking *decision-making roles* in the PTA/PTO, advisory councils, or other committees or groups at the school, district, or state level. It also refers to parent and community *activists* in independent advocacy groups that monitor the schools and work for school improvement.

Consideration of parental involvement should take each of these types into consideration as a way to conceptualize and organize strategies.

Practical Involvement Activities

This section of the report summarizes some specific parental involvement activities that have worked well in urban schools.

1. **Implementing a Parent Telephone System**. This is a method of communication that educators are finding successful. The teachers described below indicate that in their schools the system is very effective both for teachers and parents.
    a. Dwayne Kohn, in *Building Parent Partnerships*, describes "School Link," a telephone system implemented district-wide, that allows parents and students to call in to a central number and access a specific teacher's voice box. Teachers record daily messages describing what is being studied in class, homework assignments, and upcoming special events. Kohn has incorporated an additional feature to his messages: each day he has one of his K-1 students accompany him as he records his message. The student states his or her name and comments on what the class is doing that day or will be doing the next day.
    b. In a K-2 school in North Carolina, Theresa Abernathy and Laura Lavin (Building Parent Partnerships) use a "Telephone Hotline." Parents can call at anytime and in addition to accessing a specific teacher's recorder message, they can also select options such as obtaining a schedule of upcoming events and determining the cafeteria menu. The system allows for parents to leave messages for teachers and the principal.
2. **Developing and Using Videos**. Videos are mentioned frequently in a variety of ways. Authors mention videotaping special student events or projects; having students develop videotapes of skits or special programs; and using videos for public relations activities by

sending videos to local Public Broadcast Systems. Two techniques used successfully in two elementary schools are described below.

a. Patricia Edwards, author of *Parents as Partners in Reading*, has found that involving parents in school literacy programs is enhanced by videotaping student/parent events in the school. The school then approaches local agencies, such as banks and other businesses, the post office, and social service agencies and asks to set up a video display that allows parents and members of the community to view these events and see the parents involved in the children's education.

b. Dwayne Kohn (*Building Parent Partnerships*) uses videos to meet several goals. He takes a video camera to school the day after school opens and videotapes selected activities of his K-1 class. He tapes the students entering their room, going to the cafeteria, playing at recess. He introduces himself on the tape, shows the classroom, and narrates what the students will be doing.

Kohn also made a tape of his three-year old daughter at home in the evening learning to write her name. He shows her practicing writing the letters and explains that students should know how to write their names. He also shows his daughter going to bed, and he discusses the importance of children having a good night's sleep. Kohn states that the entire video (both school and home) is less than one-half hour. He makes four copies, shows the video to his students in class the next day, and loans out the four tapes to students who want to take it home to show their parents. Kohn indicates that he has had only a few students who did not have access to a VCR. He continues the loan policy until all of the students have taken the video home to show

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their parents. He states that it is not unusual to receive requests from parents later in the year to see the video again.

3. **Extending Hours**. Most educators realize that parents encounter a host of problems trying to attend functions during traditional school hours, and many of these same problems prohibit their participation in evening programs. Three examples of how schools have worked to meet this challenge are described below.

    a. Carol Calfee (*Building Parent Partnerships*) states that one step made by her intermediate school in their attempt to become a "full-service" school was to encourage community activities in the school. The school is open seven days a week from 7:00 a.m. to 10:30 p.m. and offers after-school child care and enrichment programs.

    b. Thomas Hatch (*Educational Leadership*, 1998) describes how, in an elementary school in Texas, funds were raised to implement an after-school care program. Parents in the community took notice when the students returned home from a state chess tournament with the first-place trophy.

    c. Abernethy and Lavin (*Building Parent Partnerships*) explain that in their K-2 school, the principal established a "Saturday Hours Program" so that parents could visit him during the weekend.

4. **Visiting the Home**. Although not prevalent in the literature, a trend that emerges from the literature is the use of a school representative to visit the home. One example is described below; a teacher who visits the homes of his students is also described.

    a. In Tennessee, the state legislature funded seventeen model schools that implemented various parent involvement programs (Lueder, *Educational*

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Leadership, 1989). Several of these used a full-time "home/school coordinator" whose primary responsibilities included home visitation and parent education programs. The coordinators began by working to build trust in the school systems, and initial contacts included distributing materials to parents to help their children. The coordinator also implemented weekly and monthly parent meetings to provide information on ways parents could help their children with basic skills.

b. Dwayne Kohn (Building Parent Partnerships) notes that the parents of some of his K-1 students cannot afford telephones. He visits the homes of students who are not doing well. Kohn states that he takes a book with him, and he models how to help the child read. He leaves the book with the instructions that if the child learns to read the book, he or she can keep it. Kohn also visits the homes of students who are doing well. He takes a book with him on these visits too and gives it to the students in recognition of their hard work. Kohn states that the parents are surprised and happy that he makes the effort to visit them.

5. **Building Trust**. Schools successful in developing strong community relations and parental involvement programs share an important characteristic. They take into account the time needed for parents, who may have had negative school experiences, to begin to trust the system. Schools have used a variety of methods of reach parents and begin this process. Three successful examples are described below.

   a. Abernethy and Lavin (*Building Parent Partnerships*) explain that in their K-2 school, they set out to first welcome parents into the school without emphasizing parent involvement. One form of welcome was "family night dinners." Parents were invited to join educators for dinner, and child care was provided. Parents

and teachers had opportunities at these dinners to talk together, get to know each other, and begin establishing rapport. The dinners grew to include the neighborhood around the school; in addition to the parents, aunts and uncles, grandparents, and students became involved. The teachers describe it as a "big block party."

b. In interviewing teachers who were successful in bringing parents into their classroom, Amy Baker (*School and Community Journal*, 1997) found that many teachers believed the most effective method was to request the parents' help with special demonstrations, projects, and activities. The teachers also recommended calling parents early in the school year to give positive information about the child. They noted that too often teachers only call about negative aspects of the child's schooling. By establishing rapport early and showing concern over the child's well being and progress, the teachers felt the parents were more apt to become involved.

c. Jan Deeb and her colleagues (Building Parent Partnerships) at an elementary school in Kentucky acknowledged the reluctance of parents to involve themselves in school activities based on negative school experiences. Their efforts to initiate a sense of trust included inviting parents rather than summoning them. Their school conducted workshops for parents during the day and in the evening, providing child care, and providing transportation. They designed participatory workshops, served refreshments, gave out door prizes, and provided parents with free materials to use with their children.

Characteristics of Successful Parental Involvement Programs

Practices of successful parental involvement programs share common characteristics. Perhaps most important, there is a realistic appraisal of what the teachers, the students, the community, and the parents can do. Successful programs are not carbon copies of efforts in other cities or states; they each contain unique features that incorporate the advantages of their community and address the areas of need. For example, a school system in Florida has found great success with volunteers from retirement communities (*Educational Leadership*, 1998). The school system has incorporated a component of their community and turned it into an advantage. Additional characteristics of successful programs are described below.

a. **Planning**. Planning is a theme that runs throughout the descriptions of successful programs. Planning includes, among other things, scheduling time to develop trust; performing a needs assessment of the community; soliciting funds; developing written procedures, time tables, and policies; and establishing training procedures. Joyce Epstein and Susan Dauber emphasize that the school must determine its "own starting point" (p. 302).

b. **Training.** Successful programs develop training both for educators and parents. Williams and Chaukin (1989) note that these sessions are not one-time occurrences, but rather a series of training activities delivered over a span of time. Rich (1993) also points out that teachers may not be prepared for collaborative models and need training in parental involvement activities.

c. **Communication**. Programs address communication as a two-way dialogue between the school and the parent in which both parties feel comfortable contacting the other. Seeley (1993) states that many schools communicate via

newsletter, parent meetings, and meal events, but that successful programs do many of these things, do them often, and do them because they deem it essential.

d. **Administrative Support**. Strong and consistent administrative support is found in successful programs. This support includes funding, and some programs turn to grants to help them initiate efforts. Deeb, Elmer and Gray (1996) indicate that a grant from the U. S. Department of Education was used to implement their "MegaSkills School." Abernethy and Lavin (1996) turned to the Comer School Project at Yale University and to Chapter 1 for funding. Support also includes resources—meeting rooms, materials and supplies, and equipment. Finally, support is found in the clearly delineated responsibilities of all personnel.

The reports, surveys, and research illustrate clearly that the majority of parents do want to be involved in their children's education, but inflexible school structures hamper their access and many indicate they do not know how they can help. Most teachers, too, want involved parents. Many teachers are parents, and they express concern that they must miss parent conferences and special events. The problems are not insurmountable as illustrated by the examples described above. Small steps can lead to positive gains and to an acknowledgment of the ability of the public school system to provide a quality education for all children.

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